

97-84122-12

Sachs, Julius

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secondary schools...

[S.I.]

[1916]

97-84122-12
MASTER NEGATIVE #

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308	
Z	Sachs, Julius, 1849-1934.
Box 434	Is the present mortality in secondary schools necessary? an address before the Head master's association, February 12, 1916, by Julius Sachs. [1916, 16 p.

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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm

REDUCTION RATIO: 10:1

IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA IIA IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 6/26

INITIALS: TLM

TRACKING # : 25030

FILMED BY PRESERVATION RESOURCES, BETHLEHEM, PA.

1919

IS THE PRESENT MORTALITY IN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS NECESSARY?

An Address

before the Head Masters' Association

February 12, 1916

by

JULIUS SACHS

308

Z

Box 434

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6.24.55

Is the Present Mortality in Secondary Schools Necessary?

There is something portentous, something disquieting, in the form of this question as your committee has framed it. There is hint of a condition not far removed from a feeling of panic in the very wording of the question. We discuss *actual* problems of mortality when we realize that for reasons more or less evident a serious inroad on the normal status of health in the community has gained headway; when we feel that there threaten us losses which it should be the function of the public health authorities to forestall. Let us consider for a moment how the members of the medical profession whom such a situation directly affects meet such a question. They do not attempt to conceal from themselves and the public the gravity of conditions; they unite to strike at the root of the difficulty by calling upon the teachers of preventive medicine to propose radical measures of sanitation; on them devolves the responsibility of checking the disastrous inroads of the moment, and of initiating a remedial procedure that will permanently prevent a recurrence of the threatening epidemic. And experience has shown that openmindedness in the study of existing conditions is the prerequisite, if we would successfully combat disease with its attendant destruction.

To turn from medical to educational counselors; it is not necessary to *establish* the fact that for a variety of reasons there *is* a marked falling off in attendance in the successive stages of most of our secondary schools,—a falling off due, not merely to natural causes; the term mortality with its implication of a disproportionate and unwarranted loss is not exaggerated in statement. This inordinate loss is of course most apparent in our public high schools; less so in our endowed academies and private schools. But it is a matter of national significance; its consequences are far-reaching, and may at some future time affect the welfare of the whole community.

I am not going to dwell at length on the statistical record, partly because I have not that abiding enthusiasm for statistics that some entertain, partly because I do not believe that educational endeavor can always be gauged in terms of percentage. I am sufficient of a heretic to believe that a school system is not going to destruction because its efficiency tables reveal, for instance, 29% of imperfections in algebra whilst its neighbor triumphantly records but 23%. I certainly do not believe in drawing final conclusions from certain tests, when tomorrow's efficiency expert with a new set of tests may establish a new percentage relation. But the fact remains, here is a system, superimposed on our elementary system, assumed to be an opportunity of privilege to our adolescents, urgently called for where it is *not* offered and yet frequently discarded where it is within reach of the student body. If, as is often stated, the country *needs* this higher type of schools to equip the future intellectual leaders for service to the community, it is fair to assume that our young people should complete the whole of the secondary course if they are to realize the ideals that are to be gained. An eighth or a fourth or half of such a course must needs be inadequate to the purpose in hand. There is something wrong about the student body, or the teaching body, or the fundamental plan, of a secondary school that loses from fifty to seventy-five percent of its constituency during its course, and frequently at least forty percent by the end of its first year. Such losses signify either that the pupils fall short of what they should be, or that the teaching is not what it should be, or that the courses are unwisely planned and injudiciously related to each other. There seems to me no escape from these alternatives, if one may speak of three alternatives, for even though there may be natural causes contributory to a decline in attendance,—like ill-health, need of early remunerative employment,—a first-class secondary system that makes a convincing appeal by its excellence and its sympathetic relationship, to the student body, will reduce to a minimum withdrawals from such causes. The obvious advantages of the

work will inevitably tempt parents and pupils to make special sacrifices, if they realize that they are distinctly worth while.

Many of our school administrators beg the question when they urge that half a loaf is better than no bread, and gleefully accept a year or two of attendance in high school as so much positive gain to students that otherwise would not have shared in the opportunities of secondary work. I am not so sure that a fragment of a course, whose full value rests in its continuity, its coherence,—that such a fragment is conducive to great intellectual profit.

Here, then, is my position,—a secondary school course should represent a body of attainment, so definitely planned, so wisely co-ordinated, so convincingly presented that its complete realization will be *desired* by everyone who is at all capable of independent intellectual effort. When you gain evidence of such success, you need institute no further inquiry into the value of the work of that particular high school, or system of high schools. The attendance records of the Kansas City High School or of the St. Louis High Schools from the seventies to the end of the nineteenth century, spell efficiency, large educational outlook, infectious enthusiasm, wise governance. An excellent school system will always make a successful appeal to its constituency. This does not mean that there is embodied in it the ultimate word on school programs and school management, for standards may be modified, and methods may change, but there pervades the system a genuine reciprocal confidence between teacher and taught. We have the assurance that the thing undertaken is worth doing, and is being effectively done. But such records of success are the exceptions. The country at large regards them almost with incredulity. It knows of countless misfits in the secondary school system; of disappointed parents, discouraged pupils, shattered ideals.

If we are to reach a full understanding of the tragedy of this situation, we must probe the circumstances under which it develops. The average high school accounts for the deci-

mation in its numbers by a variety of explanations; let us examine these in detail. The high school emphasizes the mental incapacity of many of its students, their lack of interest in the studies offered; on the other hand the necessity of applying rigorously standards of promotion from class to class. What do these explanations explain? How about the mental incapacity of many students? At what point is it revealed? The successful completion of the elementary school course is demanded as the sine qua non of advancement to the high school stage. With the knowledge that a differentiation in method of approach sets in at the opening of the high school course, the transition to its type of work should be conditioned on positive and definite control of the subject-matter offered in the lower school; it is not as a matter of mechanical propulsion that students should move from the 8th grade to the high school; their response to further intellectual stimulation *can* be determined in the 8th grade, and it places no stigma on a pupil, when you discover that his mental responsiveness is not such as to warrant his advance to a new plane of intellectual endeavor; at least not at that particular time. We are curiously indifferent to this latter point; other nations, the Scandinavians, for instance, recognize that minds do not always advance as by clock-work; there may set in, for reasons of arrested physical development, sometimes from environmental limitations, a condition of complete mental inertness, whose signs are all too evident. I would distinguish here between mental indifference, which may be simply a legitimate revulsion against unintelligent, mechanical class processes in the later elementary school stages, and inherent mental torpidity that is often congenital, and for which the school is in no wise responsible.

Admission into the high school should be so regulated that pupils accepted are presumably capable of profiting under *proper guidance* by its opportunities. To accept promiscuously students into high school courses, and after a short trial denounce their unfitness for the work is not only pedagogically

unsound, but socially immoral. I have little patience with that Rhadamanthine attitude of many high school teachers, who sit in judgment on what they call the palpable shortcomings of the elementary school. My answer to them would be: refuse to accept unpromising material, sift out before you begin your high school work; not every one *need* undertake high school work, but if you accept, then do *your* very best to develop successes. I would condemn in like fashion two other manifestations of high school tradition, because of their obvious unfairness, 1. Is it just, is it fair to speak of high school instruction as an opportunity to our young people, when we do not with all the skill that can be brought to bear, help them to the appreciation of this opportunity; to say to them, here is *your* opportunity; if you do not gather the full fruits, that is your misfortune, is—to put it mildly—a shocking perversion of the splendid intent that underlies our secondary school system. If you say to me, that is not the usual attitude of the high school teacher, I must retort, basing my convictions on the assurances from the lips of many teachers, it is altogether too frequent; *opportunity* I should certainly not call such an unsympathetic critical attitude. Still less could I accept a *second* point of view that obtains with particular intensity in many of our larger school systems. Teachers, personally of kindly disposition to their pupils, will tell you that as a matter of self-defence, of self-preservation in their professional standing, they must apply ruthlessly certain standards that make for rapid decimation in their student-body; their record *demands* that there shall be weeded out all but the most competent, so that there survives at the close of the high school course a select body of intellectual athletes, who have been trained, groomed to a point as near perfection as possible. Whether teachers *are* measured by such barbarous standards I am not sure; but the fact cannot be denied that they are strongly imbued with the conviction that *they are* thus measured; and the best of them deplore bitterly the situation created; what a loss to the community is involved

in this temptation to rule out the painstaking, plodding individual as against his more brilliant, and often less conscientious brother! I find in this tendency cause for a severe arraignment of our school systems, because the mortality that thus ensues is preventable, because it substitutes implacable, arbitrary standards, and a truly destructive policy, for the more delicate, more refined processes of upbuilding. As a very essential feature of this constructive process, I would emphasize an upbuilding of the student's will-power; and to substantiate the importance of this educational feature, let me refer you to a striking utterance of a writer who is at once consummate literary artist and profound thinker; Anatole France in his *Crime de Sylvester Bonnard* states the problem thus: An education which does not cultivate the will, is an education that depraves the mind.

I have already intimated what in my opinion would prove one remedy: *proper guidance*—guidance that involves specific study of the incongruous relationships that subsist in our educational scheme. I need not tell you how devoid of delicate adjustment are the boundaries between elementary and secondary school, how irregular have been the thrusts upward and downward between these originally unrelated systems, each one with a different objective, each one clamoring for an expansion of its specific field of activity, with no common acceptance for a terminus ad quem for the lower, a terminus a quo for the higher school.

Of paramount importance, therefore, to all concerned—those who may be accredited to the high school, their parents, and the high school teachers—is a clear *exposition*, offered in season, as to the meaning, the aims, the various possibilities of the high school. For purposes of detailed study such a statement should preferably be carefully edited and put into print; it should prove an *invitation* to the possibilities of high school work, but should be conservative in its utterances, not misleading, not vaguely optimistic, conceived with a profound sense of the responsibility involved. It should be at once

specific and broad; it should be addressed to the sympathies and interests of its constituency, should combat narrowness of vision, should reveal vistas of growth. To set forth in dignified, genuine terms the vital issues at this critical turning-point in a boy's or girl's life, is a piece of work of the highest significance. I have seen such advisory pamphlets that because of the stamp of truth and sincerity that they bear, must be a veritable boon to their communities; but every school system owes it to itself to record in definite language its conception of what it is attempting for its adolescents. Such a document may well be as specific as possible; it should interpret its own statements into the concrete terms of curricula and courses of study, meaningless to the average lay-mind except through interpretation. With such a fundamental statement carefully edited and expressive of the convictions of superintendent and high school principal, there might go informal elaborations of this statement at public conferences; specially qualified speakers among the teaching corps might at such gatherings develop in further detail what pupils are to anticipate in the new atmosphere. In a great city like New York it would be invaluable, if there were designated a body of specially capable teachers to enlighten and caution parents and pupils in stated meetings on the many questions involved.

It would be part of such official declarations too to offer on the basis of extensive experience words of counsel to those who chafe under school discipline, and therefore simply reach out blindly for emancipation from school attendance; to them at this critical transitional stage, and to their parents, it is our duty to point out how the premature and hasty adoption of a vocation may lead to a blind alley, retreat from which is extremely difficult. Such a study of industrial conditions as Miss Sarah M. Kingsbury made some years ago for the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial Education (1906) would furnish precious statistical data for further comment. But all this is only a first, a preliminary

step in guidance. The real *determining* factors in guidance must appear, when the student has actually enrolled for secondary school work; and a full appreciation of these factors will determine in large measure the success of the student in the new field.

The difficulties of the secondary curriculum are due to new subjects and a new method of approach; they are intimately interwoven, and the ultimate success of the student-body is contingent upon an organized system of procedure that will take cognizance equally of *both* conditions. We have been guilty of the gravest error in assuming that *somehow* with the incoming of adolescence the helplessness of the child-mind will intuitively accept the call for independent thought on unfamiliar lines. Not anywhere in nature, and certainly not in the growth of mind, are there sudden advances to definite attainment. To expect such advances, to demand them, is to invite discomfiture, and this we have effectively done in the past. Even those who escape complete shipwreck have been badly battered and have not been benefited by their experience. Painstaking initiation into the content of high school subjects and the method of attack requisite to benefit by them, is the compelling need in the first year of high school work. You realize where I am inclined to put the main responsibility for our hideous mortality tables; directly, and without further qualifications, upon our teachers and those in administrative charge of the work. It is futile, nay, far worse than that, to assume an air of academic remoteness and to watch complacently the struggles of our youngsters in their contact with new requirements and new relationships. Perhaps I feel too strongly on this subject, and you must make allowance for forcible personal impressions, but as a secondary teacher I should feel unhappy if my pupils looked upon me (with any show of justice) as I regarded my teacher of mathematics in my early days. With fifty years intervening, my memory still pictures his inquisitorial glee, his triumph over the poor little wretch whom his very manner

discomfited and unnerved; who that knows his subject cannot unsettle a helpless beginner; but, is that teaching?

I claim then that quite as important a function as actual teaching of subject matter is a penetrating study of the best method to smooth the paths of our young people in the early high school stages; the task is as subtle, as difficult as any teaching problem of the schools; it has not yet gained recognition as a fundamental duty of the teaching body. Not every teacher is specially qualified for this work, but one would naturally assume that at least the teacher of widest experience, of broadest range, would be chosen as more capable of realizing the nature of the difficulties than a relatively young, inexperienced, and untrained teacher. For he, the mature teacher, at least has had training, the training that years of trial bring to him; why should a young teacher be burdened with such responsibility? With few exceptions our teachers in high school work are absolutely untrained. Not one in a hundred *has* been trained; not one in fifty believes that he *needs* training; the prevalent opinion is still that absurd notion that is scouted everywhere *except* in our college communities, that you can always impart what you yourself know. But *do* our college requirements even assure knowledge? We encounter an *approximation* to knowledge, a certain hazy attainment rather than precise information. The teacher who does not handle his topic with definite authority cannot control the work of his pupils towards accuracy.

There is no doubt that the assignment of first-year high school students to unskilled teachers is largely responsible for the prevalent discomfiture; substitute the highest teaching capacity at the disposal of the school, the skill that utilizes every available teaching device in overcoming helplessness, and a different result will be attained. We must dispel by all odds a doctrine that has been prevalent in the teaching community. Teaching the elements of a subject is not, as many suppose, the easiest part of the work, but demands the greatest resources of the teaching art. It is from the fullness

of knowledge, from the most comprehensive grasp of the subject in its entirety that the fundamentals gain their real significance. In Germany and France they do not recognize that hierarchy in the teaching body which has worked so much harm with us, where the teacher of longer teaching experience looks with contempt upon teaching the elements, and claims as his special domain the higher reaches of his subject; *there* it is universally incumbent upon each teacher to handle the various phases of his subject from beginners' work to that of the most advanced stage, and the school-principal sets an excellent example, in the long nine years' course of the secondary school, by teaching pupils e. g. in the first year, the fourth or fifth, and the ninth. If the best teacher in the school lays the proper foundation, a less experienced hand may successfully develop the work in the next stages.

Here, then, is a matter that our schools could remedy if they chose; overthrow once for all the prevailing doctrine; insist that any and every secondary teacher must be willing to handle every phase of the work for which he professes fitness, and assign the initiation into a new subject to any one you consider particularly competent. The capable teacher has of course learned by experience to discriminate between essentials and non-essentials; he will emphasize what is really vital; economy in intellectual effort is as much a secret of good teaching as is economy of manipulation in the procedure of the efficiency expert. The man who has reached a point in his teaching when the text-book has ceased to be to him the gospel of inspiration, who is superior to its dictates, because he has given much thought to the merits of various texts and their sources, will much more effectively than the average novice enlighten his students as to the best mode of gathering their information from their text-books; teaching them *how* to study is perhaps the best way to reduce mortality in the schools. And, mark you, it is to a degree the most important feature of the first year high school work, very much more so than the amount of specific informa-

tion acquired during this period. Why do our teachers not realize this? Correct habits of study, independence in gathering, sifting and classifying desirable information, open a new era in attainment, which will affect alike the adolescent and the adult; we have treated these questions of habits of study hitherto as incidental acquirements, to be secured even whilst we are pushing ahead at a prescribed pace into unknown, unplotted territory; and we have but too frequently paid the inevitable penalty; in our attempt to serve the two needs, we have failed to accomplish either. The knowledge of subject-matter cannot be satisfactory *because* we have not sufficiently emphasized the *method* of approach.

Take any half-dozen secondary school subjects, and the probabilities are great that with the ordinary aids available, our pupils will make the *wrong* approach. How to get out of a history lesson what is of real significance, how to utilize the knowledge of Latin paradigms and Latin structure toward the logical grasp of a Latin paragraph, how to translate the language of a problem into the symbol language of algebra, how to evolve a series of logical syllogisms to the establishment of some geometric principle,—these are *mental* tasks transcending in importance by far the accident of correct performance in an individual case. Insight into *how* to go about a new problem means the acquirement of life-habits in intellectual growth; without such insight the acquisition of any number of unrelated facts is practically worthless. Here is then the crucial difficulty which we must face; if we do not *guide*, actually *guide* toward method and insight, we might as well not attempt secondary work.

I anticipate at this point remonstrance along two lines, and I am prepared to meet both types of criticism. *First*, your pupils will never grow independent, you are having them lean on the crutches that you furnish. That depends on your skill as a guide; to forestall wasteful groping, to direct intellectual effort into useful channels, not only does not impede individual mental vigor, but helps it to a speedier

exercise of its powers. Our old method, which I have described above, is one of brutal indifference; we have been concealing our indolence under the guise of benevolent watchfulness; what I advocate calls for far more work, demands restless striving on the part of the teacher, but in the face of the complete fiasco of the waiting and watching method (a fiasco even with those pupils who seemingly survive), try the only humane, reasonable method, that of constant, detailed guidance. The second argument runs somewhat in this fashion: The guidance you advocate involves a generous allowance of time which our existing high school conditions do not vouchsafe us, for we must accomplish within an allotted time, four years, tasks so comprehensive that each day must bring appreciable advance; to loiter over initiation into methods of study, spells disaster for an already congested program. Now in all fairness is this a tenable position? All secondary teachers admit that the schools have gradually been overburdened with a mass of requirements that is prohibitive of substantial performance, of complete assimilation. No conscientious teacher, enamored of his subject, can be satisfied with the present-day feverish atmosphere that substitutes speculation on examination papers for that which is alone worth while, real mental insight. The remedy is so obvious; why not have the heads of schools, public and private, unite to demand it? Our four years' high school arrangement has become by its various accretions an unworkable scheme; it does not educate, because it makes no provision for deliberate consideration, for aid, where aid is all-important. We cannot prolong this illogical condition that affords so scant a provision for the actual teaching process. The task which we have vainly tried to compass within four years requires six years; it should be begun two years earlier, and there should be no attempt to carry the pupils in the six years beyond the point which we have hitherto fixed for the completion of the high school course; the gain of two years should be unqualifiedly a gain in quality. It

seems to me, one can not be too explicit in emphasizing *this* point of view; we want time to do well the work that has been ill done; the increase in time will enable the teachers, if they are the right sort of people, to *teach*, to direct; we must set our faces firmly against that gad-fly spirit which, with the outlook upon a six-year scheme, at once dangles before our eyes the will o' the wisp of a junior-college scheme, to be grafted upon the present scope of the high school. This is not the purpose of the six-year high school idea, and the unwise advocates of the junior-college scheme would do well to realize that sound, genuine, complete performance of the high school work is far more valuable than a diluted, emasculated imitation of college work, for which neither pupils *nor* teachers are adequately equipped.

There is a virtue in *definite, specific* accomplishment; will not the secondary school make that its distinctive aim in the true interests of intelligent leadership? I should welcome with enthusiasm, as I am sure many high school teachers would, the marked change in our teaching methods which ought to grow out of the enlarged high school scheme; an entire year devoted to guidance, to direction in correct habits of study, a year in which above everything else the best teachers of the school have a chance, because they are not crowded, to arouse a spirit of intellectual desire in their pupils. We have not given these most desirable factors their fair chance; we have regarded them as possible by-products, whilst they should be considered the all-important outcome of our secondary schools. If our pupils have not been awakened to intellectual desire, never can they become in the best sense leaders. I have great faith in the readiness of the American people to meet the increased burden of expense involved in this reconstruction of our public school system. Our educational leaders have not been sure of themselves; they have temporized in efforts to make bricks without straw. Long since ought they have asserted their determination to stand for naught but genuine work; that such work demanded ample

time and more skillful handling; hand-in-hand with the fuller course ought to have gone this insistence on a higher type of trained high school teacher, with the corollary that the higher standard called for a more liberal compensation. Our communities are not deaf to the right kind of educational propaganda; but right here in our intimate gathering it might as well be said: the blame for the high school mortality and all its attendant distressing circumstances rests to the largest degree upon the teachers; it is in vain to seek explanations elsewhere, when conditions that *we* can control have been neglected. Let each one in his way contribute by word and deed to the creation of a keener sentiment of responsibility; let us develop a great preventive system that will reduce mortality in the educative processes of the secondary school.

JULIUS SACHS.

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